# Knowledge Worker
One More Time: How Do You Manage Change?
(July 2015)

If authorities like Harvard's John Kotter are to be believed, two out of three change management initiatives fail. I've been involved in many change efforts over the years, ranging in scope and scale from organization-wide transformation to minor process improvements. The success rate I've observed has been much better than one in three. I've also seen some change initiatives that were doomed from the beginning and others where they might have succeeded but they muffed it. And I've seen some changes that were pushed through by dint of sheer force, whereupon victory was declared; but, once the executives pushing the change turned their attention elsewhere, the change came undone. Nevertheless, even a one out of three success rate suggests there are some factors that separate the successes from the failures. So, in this post, I'd like to touch on what I see as some of the factors that contribute to a successful change initiative.
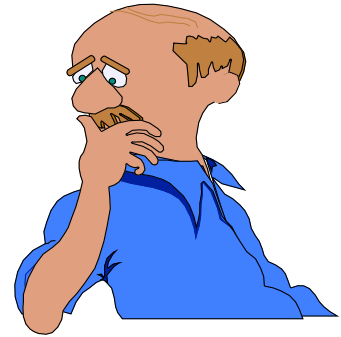
Let's begin with the question in the title: How do you manage change?
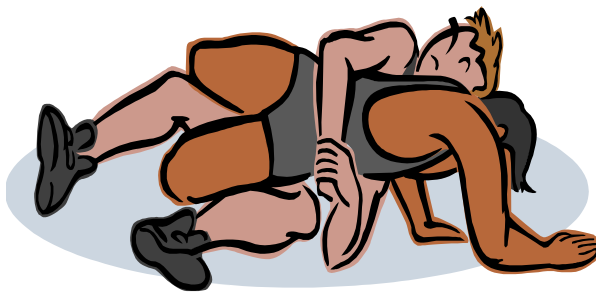
The honest answer is that you don't; instead, you grapple with it – and you keep on grappling until you wrestle it to the ground. You don't give up and you don't quit. You persevere. A successful change initiative owes as much or more to leadership than to management skill. Change is not neat, it is not linear, and it never, never ever goes according to plan. Indeed, detailed, long-range plans and schedules are all but useless. But there are some things you can do to tip the scales in your favor. Here are 13 such things gleaned from my experiences over the years:

1. The first thing to do is jump in. You can't do anything about it from the outside.

2. A clear sense of mission or purpose is essential. The simpler the mission statement the better. "Kick ass in the marketplace" is a whole lot more meaningful than "Respond to market needs with a range of products and services that have been carefully designed and developed to compare so favorably in our customers' eyes with the products and services offered by our competitors that the majority of buying decisions will be made in our favor."

3. Build a team. "Lone wolves" have their uses, but managing change isn't one of them. On the other hand, the right kind of lone wolf makes an excellent temporary team leader or straw boss.

4. Maintain a flat organizational team structure and rely on minimal and informal reporting requirements.

5. Pick people with relevant skills and high energy levels. You'll need both.

6. Toss out the rulebook. Change, by definition, calls for a configured or "crafted" response, not adherence to prefigured or "canned" routines.

7. Shift to an action-feedback model. Plan and act in short intervals. Do your analysis on the fly. No lengthy up-front studies, please. Remember the hare and the tortoise.

8. Set flexible priorities. You must have the ability to drop what you're doing and tend to something more important.

9. Treat everything as a temporary measure. Don't "lock in" until the last minute, and then insist on the right to change your mind.

10. Ask for volunteers. You'll be surprised at who shows up. You'll be pleasantly surprised by what they can do.

11. Find a good "straw boss" or team leader and stay out of his or her way.

12. Give the team members whatever they ask for — except authority. They'll generally ask only for what they really need in the way of resources. If they start asking for authority, that's a signal they're headed toward some kind of power-based confrontation and that spells trouble. Nip it in the bud!

13. Concentrate dispersed knowledge. Start and maintain an issues logbook. Let anyone go anywhere and talk to anyone about anything. Keep the communications barriers low, widely spaced, and easily hurdled. Initially, if things look chaotic, relax — they are.

If all this sounds somewhat disjointed and not as neatly organized as you might like, remember that the task of change management is to bring order to a messy situation, not pretend that it's already well organized and disciplined.

Another thing to keep in mind is that you don't "do" change management per se; managing change is (or ought to be) an integral part of whatever else it is that you're doing. If you're rolling out a new accounts payable system or sales rep compensation plan or implementing a major restructuring, then that's what you're doing and managing change is incidental to that. Change management should always be viewed and carried out in the context of some other initiative. So, when someone on high announces that "We're going to transform the culture of this organization," he or she has just announced a solution instead of setting forth a problem or issue that people can commit to resolving. Chances are this initiative will wind up in the failure column.

My final point is that we all choose. We choose to support or oppose or simply lie low; we choose to get on board or stand to one side; we choose to volunteer or wait to be drafted; we choose to share what we know and believe or we choose to keep our views and what we know to ourselves; we choose to help make things happen or stand idly by and watch them fail, then mutter, "See, I told you so." The choices are yours and mine and everyone else's to make. No one can make them for us. In the end, then, what change management is all about are the choices people make – and that includes you and me.

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About the Author

Fred Nickols, CPT, is a knowledge worker, writer, consultant, and former executive who spent 20 years in the U.S. Navy, retiring as a decorated chief petty officer. In the private sector, he worked as a consultant and then held executive positions with two former clients. Currently, Fred is the manager partner of Distance Consulting LLC. His website is home to the award-winning Knowledge Worker's Tool Room and more than 200 free articles, book chapters, and papers. Fred is a longtime member of ISPI and writes this monthly column for *PerformanceXpress*. A complete listing of all Knowledge Worker columns and access to them is available here.